



## Editorial: Put more resources into post-incarceration

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If Bobby G. Harris is ultimately convicted of killing South Mansfield Mayor Dessie Lee Patterson, a big "what if" will linger: What if Harris, a parole violator, had been taken into custody rather than freely walking the streets the day Patterson was fatally stabbed. Would March 12 have been just another day?

That answer will never be known, but Patterson's death can serve a purpose if Louisianans wake up to an inconsistency in its criminal justice system. Tagged as the state with the highest incarceration rate in the civilized world, a financially costly enterprise at \$13,000 a year per inmate, Louisiana curiously tries to get by on the cheap with its probation and parole system. With an average caseload of 121 to 1 — it could be as high as 150 to 1 — state probation and parole officers are overwhelmed.

Statewide, there are 7,300 active arrest warrants for probation and parole violators, with 1,000 dating back more than two years. In the largely rural district that includes South Mansfield — DeSoto, Sabine, Red River and Natchitoches parishes — there are more than 300 warrants as of late March.

The officer caseload represents a threat to both public safety and the state budget with the risk of loosely supervised former inmates committing new crimes and returning to taxpayer-financed prison terms.

So eager are we to put people away — we also underfund criminal defense for impoverished suspects — that the system short-changes itself on follow through. Whether released on good time or in keeping with sentencing guidelines, an inmate fresh on the streets is often a person teetering on the precipice between rehabilitation and recidivism — a life redeemed or wasted.

Parole and probation officers help ensure boundaries and safeguards are in place to increase the odds of an inmate's successful re-entry into a law-abiding world. They keep tabs on where a parolee is, what he's doing, the company he keeps, whether he's abusing drugs or still in a substance abuse program.

There is encouraging movement in the state Legislature to do a better job of rehabilitating inmates during and after their release. House Bill 334 would set up an inmate rehabilitation and work force development advisory council for help in working with technical and community colleges and other agencies for "intensive training programs" for certifying skilled craftsmen and to provide substance abuse and counseling for inmates. Already, local sheriffs provide work-release programs in which prisoners work during the day at local companies, giving these inmates an opportunity to learn marketable skills and, perhaps, get a job upon release. (And part of their wages pay the cost of incarceration.) State Rep. Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport, also has talked about legislation to provide tax breaks for companies that hire ex-inmates.

A state that prides itself as being tough on criminals is doing only part of the job if, along with punishment, there is insufficient attention — and resources — paid to keeping former inmates out of trouble. In the short term, putting more probation and parole officers in the field is an investment that can mean the difference in turning an ex-con into a productive taxpayer.

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